

Suspended Heart

by Heather Fowler

The suspended heart became an oracle of sorts. Hung from a string, immersed in the kind of glass container in which tulips grow, it was located between Bath and Body Works and Kleinfelter's Jewelers at the north entrance of the mall. Someone had lost it, and when this happened, it was tied with a string, much like a butcher's roast, and hung up high to avoid the encroachment of traveling feet. Originally, there was no water in the jar, but the janitor noticed its dryness, and he and a few other members of the cleaning staff came up with the idea of submerging the heart in a large glass vat of sterilized water.

But it went unclaimed for months, and when people started to notice its presence, it became a source of speculation. Mall rats regarded it with pity and then interest, sometimes stopping to scrutinize its bodiless, constant beating and wonder how, in a mall peeling with Christmas carols and corporate announcements, it could continue to thrive or even function. Then they noticed its love connection and greater abilities with divining.

The girl who lost this organ had no idea it was gone, which is to say she knew she missed something, but had no idea it was something vital. In general, her head felt clearer, her step was lighter, and despite entering the mall via the northern entrance on the day she grew so happy, stopping briefly at the jeweler's and then rushing back to her store on the western end, she was completely clueless that her heart had, abruptly and without warning, fallen out.

As the days passed, couples increasingly came to view it, hearing the rumor that if they stood before this heart with their beloved, a sudden, vigorous throbbing would mean it sensed their intent and

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that love was true for both parties. If it stopped beating altogether, one of the parties was false or cheating. If no love, no romantic inclination, were present, the heart would beat as usual, and one would feel that everything anticipated in the world would conform to this expectation, that life would meander on, and that a person who inspired no change in the rhythm of the beats was not a victim of heart-led fancies. Such a heart, some speculated, could not be expected to weigh in on petty squabbles or non-love quandaries like landlord spying or familial spats. People were full of questions, but it was answers they sought and, for these, they were ravenous.

The heart solely covered one topic.

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Christmas carols rang through the mall every day now. Everyone spoke of generic love and kindness or bad parking and ludicrous off-site shuttles while "Silent Night" or another timeless holiday tune blared through the loudspeakers, both shoppers and employees frequently pulling brisk strides through the arena's walkway mazes, though it was only the romantic couples that made the heart a destination. When a reporter got wind of the heart and visited, newly learning her partner of ten years manifested a strong desire for the man who lived next door, the subsequent *Tribune* article only swelled the crowds. Travel agents advertised, too: "Live, beating heart suspended in Coppendale Mall. Measure your lover's love for free! Will your match prove lasting? Only the heart can tell!" and the arriving lovers, swallowing such promises like desire's last gasp, tripled.

At first, the janitor felt terrible for allowing visitors to throng around the organ. To his wife, he confessed, "I only meant this display as an easy way for whoever lost their heart to find it again, for it not to get lost or trampled in the traffic. I didn't intend on it becoming an attraction."

"You should get a raise," his wife said. "Who else brought in such a ringer? Mall profits are through the roof! As usual, Husband, you innovate, and they do nothing to reward you!"

It was a strange sight, he admitted, to see couples of so many varieties queued up for this heart's assessment while he emptied garbage cans and swept floor tiles. There were the rich and the poor, people on holiday, people on Quaaludes, people who drove to Coppendale on their last tank of gas and risked a failed return just to find out what they could not determine from the privacy of their own homes.

"I suppose knowing the true contents of your lover's heart is worth a lot," his wife remarked one day. "And, like the best reclusive things in life, it's free. Because nothing is free anymore! Of course they love it!"

She went on to talk about how life is an elective series of choices about time and well-purchased commodities, although no one gets a free lunch and most people pay therapists to figure things out, but when she grew enthusiastic about accurate divination from elsewhere, the Godsend of Godsend, "Not everyone wants to know what this heart can tell them," he said, dampening her enthusiasm.

From his main janitorial supply station, he saw often what he began to label "The Avoiders": People who did not line up to visit the heart, but instead hurried past, some clenching a lover's hand and staring at the pavement, taking no risks that the heart might engage them, some involved more in pocketbooks or gadgetry as replacement therapy for love or any affiliated vice, but the heart noticed them all. Had they only looked up, they would have ascertained plain and simple what they did not want to know. Of this, the janitor was sure.

Meanwhile, the girl who lost her heart only thought: *What a calm life I now have! Oh, how strange! Some say there's a beating heart on the other side of the mall that tells fortunes for lovers, but I simply do not care! It's good to be free of romantic concerns. I do not need a lover! This is the best period of my entire life. I am so happy alone.* Meanwhile, she was selling E- and G-sized nursing bras to pregnant ladies at Motherhood Maternity, panel-top jeans and stretch-belly pantyhose, dresses sewn with a longer panel in the front to accommodate swelling bumps. She sold cocktail dresses and bright-colored leggings and long T-shirts, jacket clips, and belly-itch crème. She felt fine and glad. She discussed her customers' growing concerns with their bodies, though she had never been pregnant, instead conveying former shoppers' carefully gleaned wisdom. She Windexed displays with industrious satisfaction. She asked about proposed baby names. She smiled widely, pleasing her customers and herself.

The heartless contrast of her new world heartily pleased her. There had been a time when her chest hurt each day, when her eyes burned with spent tears and she had no idea what to do with the rest of her life because a man she loved had abandoned her, and her heart, she came to know, formed strong attachments quickly, but did not let go easily, which was what made her so terrible at love. During the period of her great and depressive malaise, she'd begun to feel she would never know joy again, that her every waking thought was self-eviscerating torture, accompanied by questions regarding: How she made the last incredible mistake; how, if she had the chance again, she might reverse it; how she could not institute such reversals, ever; and how, in her lifetime, love and its games of spirit-mashing, soul-deep annihilation were now destined to be over, had to be over, that was if she survived the recovery this time.

So, when her heart fell out that very same day, she had begun again to see colors as beautiful—the red, red roses; the vibrant

green grass; the blue of the hot day's sky. Near-strangers were newly enjoyable and she found herself saying things to Lizzie, her boss, like: "Oh, look, Lizzie. That heifer standing there with five fighting children—she wears the most beautiful hat! Wonder where she bought it!"

Whereas crowds had bothered her before, in her perceived solitude and estrangement, now she considered the rapid here and there of commerce participants a necessary flurry, keeping her employed and carrying their lives and goodwill into these corridors and shops. The mall was a fantastic place.

Yes, after her heart fled, she felt like skipping from store to store. She liked pregnant women again. "What has happened to me?" she often asked. "I feel so very glad!"

"You seem happier," her friends said.

"Your eyes look better," her mother said. "Ugly bags less often."

"You're selling more," her boss admitted.

"You look beautiful, Shopgirl," the lecherous husbands of her pregnant shoppers said, but this sort of advance was unwelcome, coming on the heels of other women's burgeoning bellies and usually while knocked-up partners fought for space to yank on garments in tiny fitting rooms.

And if there was a slight chill she now felt constantly, and a lack of complete conviction regarding her own emotions, this was to become her new era of action—one of getting things done, of moving forward with difficult decisions, of life's agendas either advanced or backtracked based solely on relevant thoughts and not ridiculous emotions. Her mind itself felt powerful. She thought of the abandoner, of course, but the idea of him was then a distantly

painful memory, deliberately immersed in forgetting, as if her heart, like the one across the mall, was submerged in a glass vat of chilly water, or also tied tightly with binding string. She did, she mused, kind of want to see the strung-up heart.

Most often, she parked on the west end, entering between Cinnabon and The Sharper Image. It was only when she received a call from the jeweler to say her ring was ready that she decided to venture to the other side of the labyrinthine maze to take a gander at the strange heart. At her request, the contracted jeweler had replaced her ring's original diamond with a peridot, her birth stone. The diamond she had arranged to be set in a golden pendant, to hang from a fine gold chain.

Nonetheless, when she saw the line to the strung-up heart, directly in front of the jeweler's shop, she shrugged and decided to forego seeing it, muttering, "What a wait!" and, "I don't care enough for a glimpse to wait that long."

But the janitor noticed how the heart swayed toward her when she walked past. He saw it jump and remembered how even after they had agreed upon the glass container, they had not removed the string around the heart itself, because, in test runs, it had hopped out of the water-filled vat to make a liver-on-the-counter splat as it tried to navigate the floor—though it had not leapt in any capacity for quite some time. He might say, until now, it had been sluggish. Although as she walked past, he not only saw it lurch, despite the string, but seem to follow her in the arcing radius of the jar.

Oblivious to the janitor and the heart, the happy girl entered the jeweler's shop, and the janitor, feeling the purpose of the hanging heart had been resolved, *shooed* away the lines of waiting observers, mentioning it needed a rest. "It's on a heart-break now!" he called out. Then he retrieved his ladder from the utility closet, climbed up, and cut the frantic heart down.

The woman he watched stood inside the jeweler's a long while as he held the tulip jar in his hands. First the salesgirls brought out her new ring, which she tried on and admired. Then another chic salesgirl with blonde hair and a violet pencil skirt brought out a necklace so fine that that all within the store gathered around and gaped. It was while the girl he watched paid for her purchases, as they were packed and sacked, that the janitor looked down at the heart in the jar and spoke to it consolingly, stroking it with his free hand, for it beat so fast it nearly sprung out, and he held its container against his chest gingerly while severing the inner restraining strings with his Swiss army knife, whispering, "Don't bleed. Don't bleed, now," as if he encouraged a reticent child or a fearful animal.

It did not bleed. The indentations of the butcher ties showed a bit, but as he brought the heart to the door of the jeweler's shop and waited, its smooth tissue seemed to flush redder than before, thickly beating with a rhythm like sleep, staid and docile. "You're a happy heart now, aren't you?" he said, having developed the habit of speaking to it like a cherished pet or kindly relative.

When the girl stepped out, fit to pass him, he blocked her. "Have you been missing this?" he asked. He could not help his aggression, his forceful proximity. With all his tender ministrations, it now seemed almost his heart.

"Is that the beating heart?" she replied.

She was pretty, he noticed. In a subdued way. "Yes. It followed you just now, so I thought it might be yours. I'm here to return it."

Between the two of them, there seemed a long unspoken history, a glimmer of an open-ended conversation that almost was, but he held the jar out toward her silently, like a supplicant, as she felt her

blouse slide open where a small aperture in her chest appeared. She looked at the heart and then at the pale opening of skin, gaping, that seemed to want the organ back. "Guess that heart's mine," she said. "But I don't want it." Hysteria grew within her like a bee-storm. "I didn't really, not till this instant, realize it was missing—" she confessed. "But I don't want it now. I am happy."

The janitor shifted from foot to foot, staring at the legs of his green pantsuit. "But if it's yours..." he insisted. "Shouldn't you take it back? Isn't it your obligation?"

She stared at her slim black shoes.

"What if it dies here?" he said. "Or you die? Something could die, and it would be your fault."

She looked to him as if she were about to say, "So be it," but said, instead, "I've been doing so much better without it, so much better. I never really missed it," her cheeks turning red, the necklace glimmering under the mall lights like a sparkling diamond tear on her neck. She looked at the bodiless heart, which bounced up and down in the water for her attention. Once it was gained, the heart seemed to communicate with her wordlessly, the janitor standing before them, baffled, as he watched her initiate and prolong an animated argument, throwing her hands around, saying things like, "I can't!" and "What do you want from me?" and "What good did you ever do for me?" and "No, I won't have you back! Not today! Not ever. I don't want any more of your messy failure!"

But her heart was tricky, something both he and she already knew, slowly descending into the tulip jar he held, as if it would stay down, rather forlornly, and then, before she could repair the open state of her blue gingham blouse, both watched it jump like lightning from the jar and fall back into its cavity in her chest.

A lingering crowd gathered nearby, waiting for the heart to determine who was truly in love, some people looking certain it would confirm them, some looking green, but there would be no more soothsaying from the clear water that lingered in the empty jar. "I'm sorry," the janitor told them as he turned away from the girl, who shivered and shook, seeming as if she'd just been hit with a seizure of maladroitness or smacked in the head with a curbside brick. In his peripheral vision, he noticed she fell to the ground, weeping.

Assuming his role of organizer, he then returned his attention to the remaining crowd, announcing in a loud, firm voice: "The Coppendale Mall's Divining Heart has disappeared. It's gone. Try Victoria's Secret or See's Candy for love stuff."

But when he returned his gaze to the floored girl rejecting her reabsorbed heart, she was prostrate on the tiles, beating her fists against the dirty ceramic tile, before hugging herself into a ball and moaning and sobbing like she couldn't have cared less who saw or heard. "It's back!" she exclaimed again and again, interspersing her announcement with assorted expletives, but these utterances were so convoluted with sobs, they were difficult to decipher.

When he tried to help her stand, she leveled him with her gaze and resisted, clinging to the ground, murmuring, "Haven't you done enough?"—her aggrieved tone making him feel like he'd killed a crippled and helpless thing. "I didn't want it back!" she reiterated.

But she stopped looking at him then.

He let her be.

And he cleaned the mall that day, starting with the west wing. By the time he returned to the northern entrance, she was gone, but he found her diamond necklace, chain broken, beside some fast-food wrappers near the trash. He picked up her jewelry and took it home.

"Maybe she was on a little break from her heart," his wife said that night when they discussed the situation. "It needed to do a tour to help others because it was of no use to her, perhaps. Lots of women feel that way. You shouldn't have cut that string, Honey—should have just let those people go see it. But you had to play delivery guy. Now what will happen to your raise? No more free heart at the mall!"

"I just wanted to give it back," he said. "It was so happy to see her. It jumped and throbbed."

"Just because something wants us doesn't mean we want it," his wife responded, cracking her knuckles and putting her hands behind her head, before muttering, "That poor girl. Her heart made her miserable! You returned a burden. You say she was in tears?"

"Right," he agreed. But he looked so tortured then that his wife smiled, as if to soothe him, touching and handling the sparkling diamond pendant of the girl who had lost her heart. Though the slender chain around the young girl's neck had been destroyed at the mall, within moments of his wife's receipt of the pendant, she had restrung it on a thicker, sturdier chain, and in the heavy gold-and-yellow light of their living room lamps, the white stone sparkled beautifully.

"So, you did wrong by confronting the girl," his wife told him. "But you meant well. And I love my new necklace. A lovely yule present!" She stared into his eyes, which focused on a dying Venus fly trap on the sideboard. "Too bad she didn't have a man like you," she told him. "She might've wanted her heart back."

"Or never have lost it in the first place," he replied. "But then again, maybe that's speculation. I admit, I'm no miracle."

"But you say she was crying as you left?" his wife asked.

"Yes, crying," he replied. "Torrents. Laid out on the nasty mall floor like a homeless person."

Both shook their heads, considering for the length of a beat what ideas could make somebody crazy enough to lose their very heart in the walkway of a public mall. He kissed her. She kissed him. They leaned in close, side by side, comfortable in the other's near heat, yet each already retreated into private branches of meditative thoughts, before settling in lightly for the night.

